Frequently Asked Questions

**Does the study find that teachers can't actually improve?**
Not at all. Teachers can and do improve. In 95 percent of the schools we studied, we found individual teachers who are breaking the average growth trajectory. The problem is, this sort of improvement is the exception to the rule, and there appears to be no pattern to these teachers’ growth that is readily applicable to others. The mirage refers not to teacher improvement itself but to the fact that we’re not nearly as close to achieving meaningful teacher improvement at scale as the conventional wisdom suggests. As a field, our conviction around teacher support strategies and investments has frequently exceeded the evidence for those strategies.

**Does the study find that all professional development is useless?**
No. Again, we found individual teachers who improved substantially in almost every school we studied, and it’s entirely possible that some of their success is the result of their development experiences. But we see no roadmap for replicating these isolated success stories. We found no evidence that any kind or amount of professional development is consistently helping teachers improve, even if a particular combination happens to work well for an individual teacher.

**Does the study find that districts should cut their investment in professional development?**
Absolutely not. Helping more teachers improve is a critically important goal that could make a huge difference for students, so broadly cutting support to teachers would be disastrous. In fact, the charter school network we studied spends significantly more per teacher on development than the districts we studied, but they also see much more widespread improvement in teacher practice: around seven out of 10 teachers showing substantial improvement over time (compared to three in 10 in the districts we studied), and a greater sense of urgency to improve among teachers, with more than 80 percent agreeing they have weaknesses in their instruction. Rather than cutting their investments in helping teachers improve, districts should make sure those investments are actually helping, by evaluating existing
development efforts against a measurable standard and shifting funding toward activities that are getting results.

**Did you look at how well [name any specific development strategy here] worked?**

There’s a good chance we did. Unlike most research on professional development, we didn’t track the results of a narrow set of development activities. Instead, we used many different indicators to identify teachers who improved substantially, then worked backward to find common threads in their professional development experiences. We very intentionally cast a wide net in defining “professional development,” to give us the best chance to find some useful patterns. We asked teachers about traditional one-time professional development, extended development programs, independent teacher efforts, formal and informal peer collaboration, receiving direct coaching, completing university coursework, time with a formal evaluator, peer observations, administrator observations, feedback, technique practice, follow-up support and new teacher preparation and mentoring.

**What about all the research that shows personalized, sustained, job-embedded professional development is effective?**

There are a few things to know about research on PD. The vast majority of U.S. studies done in recent decades have lacked rigorous designs. Among the few studies that meet higher methodological standards, results are fairly mixed. The best and most recent studies, including two funded by the federal government in the past decade, generally cast doubt on whether development that checks most of the boxes for “high-quality” leads to long-term improvements in teacher practice and student learning. In short, the research base doesn’t say what many people think it says.

**Are you sure the problem isn’t just bad implementation of the right ideas and strategies in these districts?**

We don’t find evidence to support this statement. If implementation were the main issue here, we likely would have found some schools—those implementing the current range of supports “correctly”—that were helping teachers a lot more than others. We didn’t. We actually found that teachers who improved substantially were spread pretty evenly across schools. Additionally, teachers who improved were no more satisfied with their experiences, nor did they have different opinions on which activities are most effective for making lasting improvements to their instructional practice.

It’s also worth noting that much of the development teachers receive now has been around for years, if not decades. Yet in that time, none of the research on teacher development has uncovered examples where any of these strategies are consistently helping teachers improve. Our findings support the wider research base.

**How did you identify teachers who improved? Were you just using value-added data?**
We used an array of teacher performance measures that went beyond value added. We wanted to identify as many teachers as possible who seemed to have improved substantially, so we’d have the best chance to find useful patterns in their development experiences. We used multiple performance measures to identify those improvers—value-added scores were one of those measures, but we also looked at overall evaluation ratings, classroom observation ratings and teachers’ scores on the individual skills rated in classroom observations. We also used several different definitions of “improvement”—for example, we searched for teachers who improved more than their peers with similar experience and a similar starting performance level, as well as teachers who fell into one of the top quartiles for improvement over a two-year period.

**How did you calculate the extent of districts’ current investment in teacher improvement?**

We wanted to understand all the staff time and resources districts dedicate to teacher improvement. That means we considered not only straightforward “professional development” line items, but also an analysis of line-item budgets and personnel data, financial and policy documents, teachers’ contracts and interviews with district staff members and school leaders. We generated estimates on a sliding scale of three tiers, with the lowest tier representative of more traditional development activities and the higher tiers representative of more strategic investments, such as teacher evaluation and rewards for attaining higher levels of effectiveness.

**Why aren’t teachers improving more often?**

Our data don’t provide a definitive answer. But we can say that there seems to be a lot of effort—in terms of time and resources—devoted to helping teachers improve, but not a lot of urgency among the people involved, from district staff to school administrators to teachers themselves. We see evidence of this in the disconnect between the investment being made in teacher development and teachers’ high overall evaluation ratings, which would imply that many teachers don’t have much room for improvement (even when their scores on individual skill-level indicators in classroom observations suggest otherwise, and their student outcomes are far from where they need to be). Teachers seem to have internalized this message that their performance is good enough as-is.

We also see a lack of coherence to the whole system, with teachers getting input from multiple different sources at both the district office and school levels that often aren’t even coordinating with each other.

It’s worth noting that responsibility for this shouldn’t rest with teachers alone, who usually have little control over the kind of development that’s offered to them. It has not been their job to monitor results and adjust accordingly. Likewise, it’s also important to acknowledge that even when teacher supports don’t lead to improvement, they are driven overwhelmingly by a desire (on the part of districts and school leaders) to help teachers be the best they can be. Everyone at the table has good intentions.

Where we have fallen short, as a field, is monitoring whether professional development efforts are really helping teachers improve their instruction—or even setting a clear vision of great instruction for teachers
to work toward—and absorbing those results into future strategies. We’ve been too slow to evolve when things are not working. We count ourselves among that group at TNTP.

Wouldn’t we get better results if we just put teachers in charge of development?

Not if that was the only thing we changed about the current system. Giving teachers more of a choice in their development activities could be a good idea to try, especially given the mismatch we found between the kind of development teachers want and the kind they’re actually getting. But our findings suggest that no particular mix of development activities—whether it’s created by teachers or anyone else—will produce the kind of improvement we want on its own. Development activities need to operate within the right culture to have a chance of succeeding at scale—a culture where teachers have clear, credible information about how they need to improve, and where there’s real accountability for making that improvement happen.

Doesn’t teacher improvement hinge on the quality of the leader in the school?

While this wasn’t a question we were able to look at comprehensively, nothing in our analysis suggests that it’s true. If it were, we’d expect to find teachers improving substantially more in some schools—the ones with the best leaders—than in others. Instead, we found that teacher improvement was distributed across schools fairly evenly. And while we had fairly limited data on school leader quality, none of those measures stood out as powerful predictors of teacher growth. However, it’s certainly fair to say that school leaders have a crucial role to play in creating the kind of culture that’s necessary for development activities to work at scale. After all, they usually give their teachers more direct feedback and support than anyone else. And we did see that teachers who had higher confidence in their formal evaluators (usually school administrators) showed progress on their observation scores.

Did you find any evidence supporting the theory that teachers improve as a result of multiple factors (aligned development activities, awareness of strengths/weaknesses, etc.)?

The CMO we studied provides an example of what can happen when school systems focus on the conditions for development to be successful as much as development activities themselves. Teachers at the CMO receive plenty of development—the CMO actually spends more per teacher on development than the other districts we studied. But the CMO supplements this investment with a focus on creating a culture of clear, high expectations about great teaching, being deliberate about central office and school-level roles and responsibilities around development, and providing teachers with regular, targeted feedback from people they trust. The results are encouraging: about seven out of 10 teachers in this CMO improved their performance substantially, compared to only three out of 10 in the other districts we studied. Of course, a single CMO is a small sample size, and certainly doesn’t provide conclusive proof about what it really takes to help teachers improve. But it certainly points to an encouraging path that other districts should explore further.